

Braley, Harkin Push for Prompt Response on Study Examining How to Effectively Help Military Families

Representative Bruce Braley (IA-1) and U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) today urged Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to quickly provide the results of a study they commissioned under a Guard and Reserve provision that became law last year. Under the provision, the Coming Together for Guard and Reserve...

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Iowa Membersâ€™ â€œComing Together for Guard & Reserve Families Actâ€• Calls for Research into How Best to Serve Guard and Reserve Families

Washington, Apr 24 -

Representative Bruce Braley (IA-1) and U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) today urged Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to quickly provide the results of a study they commissioned under a Guard and Reserve provision that became law last year. Under the provision, the Coming Together for Guard and Reserve Families Act, the Department of Defense must conduct research on the most effective means to enhance and improve support programs for families of the Armed Forces, including families of National Guard and Reserve members. Harkin and Braleyâ€™s Act authorizes the Department of Defense to beef up support services for families of deployed National Guard and Reserve soldiers.

In the letter, Braley and Harkin explain that, â€œwhile all military families face significant challenges throughout the cycle of deployment, Guard and Reserve families are particularly vulnerable because they often live far from military bases and do not have access to many of the services which active duty military families draw upon.â€•

â€œIowa Guard and Reserve soldiers have been serving our country almost continuously since the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,â€• Braley said. â€œWaterlooâ€™s 1-133rd Infantry returned last year from the longest continuous deployment of any ground combat unit. For well over a year, their families remained at home without them. While our armed forces are away protecting our country, itâ€™s our duty to ensure that the families of these brave men and women have the care and support services they need. I hope that Secretary Gates will act quickly to ensure that Iowaâ€™s military families get the support they deserve.â€•

â€œIowaâ€™s Armed Forces have bravely fought for our country for the last six years. And just last week we learned that the Des Moines-based 132nd Fighter Wing of Iowaâ€™s Air National Guard was being deployed for the second time to Iraq. While our soldiers are out on the field, it is our responsibility to help their families here at home, especially those who live in rural communities,â€• said Harkin. â€œIowans excel at forming a community around those in need but it is our duty to join them by finding out how to best serve these families and implementing those strategies immediately. I look forward to hearing back from Secretary Gates and taking swift action to fight for these families at home.â€•

Braley and Harkin were inspired to introduce their Coming Together for Guard and Reserve Families Act after the president decided to escalate the number of troops deployed in Iraq. Soon thereafter, more than 600 Iowa soldiers with the 133rd Infantry of the Iowa National Guard were notified that their combat tours in Anbar Province would be extended to 16 months. The members received scores of anguished letters and calls from their family members, who were already struggling â€œlargely in isolation â€œ with the stress of having their loved ones deployed in one of Iraqâ€™s most violent regions.

A copy of Harkin and Braleyâ€™s letter is below:

April 24, 2008

The Honorable Robert M. Gates

Secretary of Defense

United States Department of Defense

1000 Defense Pentagon

Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Gates,

We are writing to thank you for undertaking an important study to determine the most effective means to enhance and improve family support programs for families of the Armed Forces, including families of National Guard and Reserve members, throughout the cycle of deployment. We also request that you provide us with the results of this study as soon as it has been completed by the Department of Defense (DOD).

This study is mandated in Section 583 of H.R. 4986, the Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Act. The requirement for this study is the result of our efforts to ensure that the spouses and families of National Guard and Reserve members receive the support services they need throughout the cycle of deployment.

As you know, National Guard and Reserve members are serving our country more than ever in the world's most dangerous places, including Iraq and Afghanistan. Many Guard and Reserve units, like the 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry of the Iowa National Guard, are facing multiple and extended deployments, resulting in long separations from their families. These long separations often lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty within families, and can put children at risk for depression and behavioral and academic problems.

While all military families face significant challenges throughout the cycle of deployment, Guard and Reserve families are particularly vulnerable because they often live far from military bases and do not have access to many of the services which active duty military families draw upon. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, it is imperative that we ensure that Guard and Reserve troops and their families have the support and assistance they need before, during, and after deployment.

We believe that the completion of this study is a critical and necessary step to determining the most effective ways to help military spouses and children, and to ensuring that we provide the best and most comprehensive support for members of the Armed Forces and their families now and in coming years. We also believe that the completion of this study will allow the DOD and Congress to build and improve upon the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, which was established in H.R. 4986 to provide National Guard and Reserve members and their families with sufficient information, services, referrals, and proactive outreach throughout the deployment cycle.

Thank you for your careful attention to this study. We look forward to seeing the results of the Department's study, and to working with you to build upon your findings and your current efforts to provide the best support for military families that our nation can offer.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,

Tom Harkin

Bruce Braley

United States Senator

Member of Congress